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ABSTRACT

Seventy-six college couples were interviewed with Kohlberg's moral dilemmas interview, given the Mosher Sex Guilt scale and took a sex experience inventory. Men, women, and couples who were at the law and order stage of moral reasoning were higher on sex guilt than those at other levels of morality. Male sex experience was associated with morality but female sex experience did not vary with female moral reasoning. The pattern of results suggests that the males' moral reasoning is a better predictor of a couple's sexual behavior than is the females'. Males in mixed morality couples seem to be dominant in setting standards, which women accede to, even if they are guilty about their behavior. (Author)

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The Relationship Of Moral Reasoning To Sex Guilt And Sex Experience In College Couples

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Sex guilt has been demonstrated to be negatively related to sexual behavior in both males and females (Mosher and Cross, 1971). Moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1964) has been related to sex guilt and sex experience in college women. The present study sought to determine how moral reasoning is associated with sex guilt and sex experience for college couples. It is hypothesized that law-and-order-morality (Kohlberg's stage 4) will be associated with the greatest guilt and least sexual experience for males, females and couples.

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METHOD

Subjects

There were 152 subjects in this study, most of whom were undergraduate students at the University of Connecticut. There were 67 male and 72 female undergraduates, and 23 other subjects who were dating undergraduates. The subjects participated as couples. At least one of the partners in each couple received credit in an introductory psychology course. The subjects signed up with the explicit understanding that they be part of a dating couple whose partner was willing to participate. The sign-up sheet indicated that this was to be a study of the interpersonal relationship between couples who defined themselves as casually dating, steadily dating, pinned, engaged, or living together. Eighty couples signed up; of these, 76 completed the study.

Procedure

Each couple was seen by one of four trained interviewers. The procedure was for the interviewer to give an introductory speech indicating the nature of the study. The couple was then given the option of agreeing to participate or not. Only one couple left.

Following the introduction, the couple was separated. One partner was given the questionnaires to complete while the other partner was interviewed with the Kohlberg Moral Dilemmas. When both partners completed their tasks, they switched places. Each interviewer alternated interviewing males and females first.

Questionnaires

Revised Sexual Experiences Inventory. The Sex Experiences Inventory

(Brady & Levitt, 1965) obtains information about sexual encounters with present and past partners. The original scale was revised so as to increase the clarity of items. Males and females used the same form. The Revised Inventory seeks information regarding a person's sexual behavior, feelings, reasoning with partners, and ratings of premarital sexual standards.

Mosher Forced Choice Guilt Inventory. The Mosher Forced Choice Guilt Inventory (Mosher, 1966) was designed to assess sex-guilt, morality-conscience guilt, and hostility guilt.

Sex-guilt, the variable focused on in this study, is measured by the sex-guilt subscale. The female form has possible scores ranging from +64 (high guilt) to -61 (low guilt). The scores for the male form range from +37 to -45. The mean of both forms was standardized at a score of 0.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Men and women who were at the Law and Order stage of moral reasoning were higher on sex guilt than those classed at other levels of moral reasoning. These data are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Male Sex-Guilt as a Function of Modal Moral Reasoning Stage

Modal Stage	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Personal Concordance	29	-21.4	13.4
Law and Order	14	-16.6	10.8
Social Contract	22	-28.4	12.5

$F = 4.00$, $df = 2/62$, $p < .05$

Table 2

Female Sex-Guilt as a Function of
Modal Moral Reasoning Stage

Modal Stage	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Personal Concordance	40	-44.9	10.1
Law and Order	9	-32.0	22.4
Social Contract	16	-49.3	6.7

$F = 6.34$, $df = 2/62$, $p < .01$

Law and Order men were less sexually experienced than those in other classifications. Female sex experience, however, did not vary with moral reasoning. Tables 3 and 4 present these data.

Table 3

Male Sex Experience as a Function of
Modal Moral Reasoning Stage

Modal Stage	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Personal Concordance	29	8.6	2.3
Law and Order	15	6.7	2.8
Sociat Contract	23	9.4	1.6

$F = 6.38$, $df = 2/64$, $p < .01$

Table 4

Female Sex Experience as a Function of
Modal Moral Reasoning Stage

Modal Stage	N	$\bar{X}$	SD
Personal Concordance	40	8.8	2.4
Law and Order	10	8.4	2.8
Social Contract	16	8.8	2.6

$F = 0.09$, $df = 2/63$, n.s.

Psychoanalytic theorizing about authoritarianism is congruent with these findings. People who judge moral dilemmas in terms of rigid codes and laws and more guilty about sex and less experienced sexually than people who are either higher or lower on the moral reasoning continium. It seems that the traditional pre-sixties moral sanctions are still in effect for a large segment of the population.

The fact that female sex experience did not vary with moral reasoning, but female sex guilt did, is believed to be associated with male dominance in setting sex standards for couples. Female partners might participate in sexual liasons to a degree that is beyond their personal preference, in order to maintain the relationship. This interpretation is bolstered by these other findings: couples only infrequently had intercourse when the male was classed as law and order, and the female at either the personal concordance or social contract stage. When both partners were at the personal concordance or social contract stage, intercourse was more frequent. When both partners were at the law and order stage, intercourse was highly unlikely.

This pattern suggests that the man's moral reasoning is a better prediction of a couple's sexual behavior than the moral reasoning of the woman. Males in mixed couples seem to be dominant in setting standards, which women accede to, even if they are guilty about their behavior.

Law and order morality seems to have a particularly strong effect on the behavior of many college couples. All collegians are clearly not libertarian, and may seem not even to be liberal about their sexual behavior.

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